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**‘A different kind of reading’: the emergent literacy practices of a
school based graphic novel club.**

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Abstract:

This paper explores the possibilities for pedagogy inherent in the reading practices which emerged from an extra-curricular graphic novel reading group set up in a Scottish secondary school. The research is presented within the framework of the New Literacy Studies and its focus on ‘practices’ and ‘events’ but, more specifically, it uses the framework developed by researchers working on the Literacies for Learning in Further Education project conducted recently in the United Kingdom. This framework allows a more detailed exploration of ‘events’ by unpacking the fine-grained *aspects* that compose a literacy practice. This paper aims to identify, trace and analyse the *aspects* of the emerging new practice of this Reading Group. While the framework it employs is based on an opposition between curricular and non-curricular practices, the data presented in this paper derives from an *extra*-curricular activity uniquely positioned inside the school but outside of the official curriculum. By focussing on notions of identity and process in particular, the paper presents a critique of the ways in which literacy practices which take place outside of the classroom have been undervalued or ignored by educational policy and practice.

Keywords: graphic novels and comics; literacy practices; pedagogy; extra-curricular.

Introduction

In the 1940s, 50s and 60s studies carried out in both the U.S. and U.K. on the influence of the comics medium on children tended towards the negative. Indeed, commentators such as Frederick Wertham (1955) and George Pumphrey (1964) went as far as to argue that comics not only caused psychological harm to children who read them but also contributed to acts of moral depravity. However, more recently educationalists have championed comics both as objects of study in their own right, and as useful tools in the delivery of mainstream curricular content. While the use of resources with a high image to text ratio has always been prevalent in the primary school sector where children are learning to read, the increasingly visual nature of the communication landscape has prompted those working in the secondary sector to follow suit. The rise of the ‘graphic novel’, alongside a publishing industry which specializes in adapting classic literary texts into comic book format, have led to a host of claims about what the comics medium can achieve when transposed into classrooms at this later stage of schooling. Such claims are overwhelmingly related to notions of ‘literacy’; while more nuanced studies specify particular kinds of literacy (El Refaie and Horshelmann 2010), others use the term more simplistically (Carter 2007; Bitz 2009).

What we mean by ‘literacy’ is vital if we are to unpack and explore some of the assumptions present in these claims. Most of these still rest on the idea that literacy is a set of cognitive skills owned by individuals and detachable from both the text type and the context in which it is being read/written. This is a view perpetuated in many

countries by educational policy and alarmist media narratives about the impoverished literacy of school age children. It implies that the reading and interpretation of texts remains unchanged in the act of moving them from one space into another. However the work in New Literacy Studies (NLS) has challenged this view. The NLS argument is that literacy is a situated 'practice' dependent on the institutional, cultural and social contexts in which 'events' of reading and writing take place (Heath 1983; Street 1984; Gee 1992; Barton and Hamilton 1998, 2000; Moss 2007). This means that as texts move, their meaning may change, making transferability from one context to another more complex. Furthermore, recent work on multiliteracies (New London Group 1996; Cope and Kalantzis 2000) and multimodality (Kress 2003) point to the multiplicity and shifting modes through which people communicate and interpret the world around them. The employment of resources such as comics and graphic novels is partly a response to this awareness of multiplicity and multimodality in a new media age. There have been several documented successful uses of these texts in classrooms (Esquivel 2006; Gibson 2007, 2008, 2009, 2010; Pantaleo 2011; Schwartz 2002, 2006; Thompson 2008), however none of these approaches the reading of comics through the lens of literacy practices. In doing so, this paper suggests that the *processes* of reading, and not simply the text itself, might inform classroom pedagogy in productive ways.

This article draws upon recent research in New Literacy Studies, in particular the findings of the Literacies for Learning in Further Education project (Ivanic et al 2009), to examine issues on text, context and transfer in relation to an extra-curricular Graphic Novel Reading Group set up in a secondary school in Scotland. In the first section I outline the theoretical framework developed by this project. I then go on, in

the second section, to introduce my own project, its methodology and relevance to the literacy framework. The third and fourth sections of the paper employ aspects of the framework in order to see how far it is confirmed, extended or challenged by the data on the reading of graphic novels. I compare the features of non-curricular literacy practices valued by the students who took part in the LfLFE project with those valued by the Reading Group. I then go on to look at a Reading Group session which took place late in the year when the group had been running for some time. In doing so I highlight the ways in which the Reading Group became a distinctive practice in its own right and I go on to consider the possibilities for pedagogy which this practice presents. In doing so, I suggest that non-curricular literacy practices need to be taken into account by policy makers and curriculum innovators both in transferring popular texts into classrooms, and perhaps more generally, in terms of strategies which could be used to teach more traditional texts. Finally, I conclude by considering again notions such as text and context, given that my particular data set relied on a uniquely positioned *extra*-curricular activity, and suggest some of the challenges presented by my particular data to the notion of transfer or border crossing of literacy practices.

Text, Context and ‘Bordering’ in New Literacy Studies

In this paper, the concept of a literacy ‘event’ (Heath 1983) is used to structure my discussion of the Reading Group. David Barton and Mary Hamilton define such events as ‘observable episodes which arise from practices and are shaped by them’ (Barton et al. 2000:8). However, the relationship between text, event and practice is much more complex and inter-dependent than this definition might suggest. For this

reason, I draw upon a more recent study carried out in the U.K. whose theoretical framework is situated within NLS, but which also moves forward some of its thinking in ways which are useful to understanding the data from my project.

In re-examining concepts such as ‘events’ and ‘practices’ in pedagogical contexts, the Literacies for Learning in Further Education (LlLFE) Project (Ivanic et al. 2009) developed a framework which attempts to distinguish the more fine-grained *aspects* of literacies. The project identified nine *aspects* of a literacy practice. These are: content; purpose; audiences; languages, genres, styles and design; flexibility and constraints; roles, identities and values; modes and technologies; actions and processes; participation. The researchers argue that each of these aspects can be understood on two levels. Firstly, it is an observable feature or factor of a literacy event and hence collectable as data. Secondly, the aspect can be used as an analytical tool for inspecting and exploring the practice in detail. For example, ‘participants’ are identifiable simply as those involved in the practice and how they are interacting with each other. However, it can also be regarded as raising questions about ‘rights and responsibilities’, ‘rules of engagement’, ‘issues of prestige and status’, ‘power relations’ etc. (Ivanic et al. 2009: 51). They also identified the common characteristics of the everyday literacy practices of the students with which they worked. These were: they were ‘purposeful’ to the participants; oriented to a clear audience; shared (involving interactions and collaborations with others); learned through a participatory process; in accordance with their values and identities; agentic (controlled by the student); self-determined in terms of time and place; non-linear in terms of its reading paths; multimodal; multimedia; generative (creative and productive of meaning); varied; owned and finally, specific to a time and place

(Ivanic et al. 2007, 2009). By focussing on the aspects of literacy practices and the characteristics of everyday literacies, the possibilities for pedagogical innovations were explored.

This analysis allowed for a more nuanced examination of how or why ‘*border crossing*’ of literacy practices from informal to curricular contexts may or may not take place. In their thinking, concepts such as ‘context’ are not ‘container-like and bounded’ but rather, ‘an arena of activity with fluid boundaries, in which context does not pre-exist practice but co-emerges through and with it.’ (Ivanic et al. 2009: 23).

Boundaries are enacted through pedagogies. The work of the LfLFE project was carried out in four further education colleges in the U.K. where aspects of literacy practices in formal and non-formal settings, such as home and leisure, were explored. The project aimed to determine the variety of literacies exercised by students in their everyday lives and to consider how these could be ‘harnessed’ for learning in college (Ivanic et al. 2007). While the researchers started with metaphors about ‘domain’ and ‘border practice’, these were refined into concepts such as ‘bordering work’ (‘mobilizing aspects of literacy practices across the borders between domains’) and ‘bordering off’ (gleaning aspects from a home literacy practice for pedagogic purposes, for example) (Ivanic et al. 2009:172). From their findings, they argue that these practices are only possible if the individual student or lecturer takes into account the *aspects* of a non-curricular literacy practice which are critical in the pedagogical context within which they are operating. They argue that literacy practices are not transferred wholesale from one context to another, but rather there needs to be ‘resonance’ between the two and this depends on the ‘configuration of micro-practices which are assembled as a literacy practice’ (Ivanic et al. 2009: 173).

Successful harnessing of non-curricular literacy practices for curriculum pedagogy relies then on a ‘judicious mix of consonance and dissonance to achieve the resonance which...characterizes a good learning activity’ (Ivanic et al. 2009: 175). While the LfLFE study was carried out in the context of colleges in the UK, this article seeks to explore the extent to which the theoretical framings developed are also relevant to the context of schooling.

Methodology

The research project therefore explores issues around text, context and practice in relation to a Graphic Novel Reading Group set up in an independent secondary school in Edinburgh, Scotland.¹ This ‘Cool Club’, as it came ironically to be known amongst its members, constituted an extra-curricular activity which took place once a fortnight in a lunch time slot over the course of one school year. Ten students from the Senior 5 year group (approximately sixteen years old) and one teacher (myself) would select, read and meet to discuss a graphic novel on each occasion. Attendance at the Club was voluntary and the students who chose to become part of it (eight boys; two girls) had responded to a notice in the daily school bulletin. Most of them knew each other and socialized with one another on a regular basis prior to the existence of the Club. One girl, Su, who joined the Club a little later than the others, was not part of their social group in school. It is worth noting here the gender imbalance in the Club as comic reading has a reputation (in the U.K. and U.S) for being a largely male activity. While this is an important consideration in importing such texts into mainstream

¹ ‘Independent’ schools in the U.K. denote private fee-paying institutions run independently of the state.

classrooms, it is not my main concern in this paper. Indeed, gender was not a category that the subjects themselves evoked, even when I asked them direct questions about it in interviews; neither was my gender (female) as the organizer of the Club, ever referred to by the pupils themselves.

While the timing of the Club was loosely constrained by the lunch hour, the arrival and departure times of the members proved to be flexible. They came and went as they pleased, choosing to attend some sessions and not others. I communicated with them via the school bulletin, the internal e-mail system, or face to face if I happened to see them in a corridor. Two of the pupils were in my English class at the time and I had taught one of the others when he was in his first year at the school. The remaining pupils were unfamiliar to me but they were aware of my presence in the school as a teacher of English. The discussion was unstructured, often digressive, undisciplined (in that pupils often spoke over one another) and candid, both in its expression of opinions about the text and its sharing of unrelated information and views. As a group we determined the amount of time we spent discussing a text. The features of this Group were, in other words, very different to those of the formal English classroom and many of the practices which arose and developed took me by surprise, as did the fervent loyalty to the Club.

Research was based upon a mix of qualitative methodologies, including participant observation, critical reflection, semi-structured interviews with students and recordings of Reading Group discussions. The Reading Group was set up at my instigation and I coordinated, attended and participated in, as well as recorded, the sessions throughout the year. My methodology is partly reflexive as I employ my own

assumptions as the original founder of the Group as a way to structure a contrast between the practices that arose within the Group and those which I had, as a mainstream classroom teacher, assumed would take place. My own reflections, as well as interview data, serve as a way of bridging the gap between the extra-curricular space of the Reading Group and the curricular space of the classroom, in particular the English classroom. The case study presented here is used as an example of what both a change in text (graphic novels as opposed to novels) and context (extra-curricular as opposed to curricular) can illuminate about literacy practices and what it may be able to suggest about moving popular multimodal texts across the 'boundaries' or 'domains' (Barton and Hamilton 1998) that exist within pupils' lives. Furthermore, the data highlights the disjuncture between the everyday literacy practices of the pupils and those they are expected to demonstrate at school. Indeed, it shows how the kind of learning that most classrooms aspire towards can take place when those everyday literacy practices are allowed to develop.

While there are clear differences between the LfLFE project and mine, not least its size and scope, there are also important similarities which make the identification of aspects and the framework developed a useful one for analyzing my own data. While the researchers involved in the LfLFE project were working in a different institutional context with youth and adult participants, I was working with school age students. The domains of their lives would, arguably, be less abundant and less complicated. They were not responsible for children and household payments and hence their familiarity with non-curricular but formal literacy practices (banks, the work place, local councils etc.) were limited. As school age students they had much less power over decision-making in their own lives than the students who had chosen to attend a

college. The courses they followed were all academic, as opposed to the college students who studied a variety of academic and vocational subjects, and they focused very much on achieving Highers (the most important qualification in the Scottish school system) and going to University. The context of the Reading Group was *extra-curricular* (a school club) rather than *non-curricular* (work, family, community) and its continued association for the pupils with something that was both in and out of school and involved the participation of an ‘off duty teacher’ is important in the data analysis which follows. Lastly, while the LfLFE researchers looked at both reading and writing practices, this study considers only reading.

Despite such differences in terms of the site, participants and placement of the practice, in both cases the focus is on a practice which the participants did not associate with the formal curriculum. Indeed the Reading Group was not something the students would have identified as ‘literacy’ if they had been asked. Similarly, as with many of the non-curricular practices considered in the LfLFE project, this was a highly complex practice which students engaged in but was under-valued and unrecognized in the official institutional context.

Reading Graphic Novels

For these students graphic novels were, as Su put it, ‘a different kind of reading’. This difference was attributed to the *properties of the text* they were reading, as well as the *context* – the Reading Group – in which it was read. For the majority of these students it was the talk, noise and conviviality over cups of tea which formed an important part

of the value of attending. 'It's fun doing that,' said Adam, 'it's sort of fun comparing views'. Similarly, for Robert,

It's the ability to get together with a group of people you know and are friends and talk about something that you've read. Who likes it and who doesn't. The group experience.

To evoke the terms of the LfLFE framework, then, it is the other *participants* who make an important contribution to the dynamics and value of the practice, but it is also the *actions and processes* which take place. One of the most significant of these was the potential for collaborative reading which occurred. There were occasions when pupils would arrive at a session without having read the chosen text and there was constant *sharing* of texts (lending and borrowing, reading simultaneously). Adam told me,

I think with a graphic novel you can have, not quite *two* people reading it at once but...for example, when I borrowed *Gon* off Andrew I was reading it through a study period with Robert sitting next to me and every now and then we'd point out something amusing and something we'd noticed in it and you couldn't do that with a novel.

Another aspect of the process of reading which pupils valued was related to the notion of time. This included the *time* taken to read the graphic novel, the *times* when one could read it and, within that reading itself, the choice to spend as little or as much time as one liked on an image or page. Fergus noted that,

[W]ith novels you've got your words on the paper and you imagine it, whereas with graphic novels you've got the pictures there as well and you can either build on that in your head or you can just keep it to that, sort of, spend as much time as you like on that. Just looking...

Indeed much of what students spoke about as enjoyable about reading graphic novels tallies with the characteristics of everyday literacy practices identified by the LfLFE project. Some of the similarities are perhaps obvious; graphic novels are by their very nature multimodal, combining both pictures and words. Their visual dimension was referred to repeatedly by pupils as part of their intrinsic value, not just in terms of time as discussed above, but also with regard to its capacity to involve the reader.

Comparing them to non-graphic novels, Scott told me,

[With] books you can feel immersed but you don't feel as if you're actually there but with a graphic novel you're in the room, you can see the room around you.

Their non-linearity and the variety of layouts and constructions which make the reader's gaze wander up and down and diagonally across a page (or pages) also appealed to them. The variety of 'reading paths' (Kress and van Leeuwen, 1996) was also what enabled collaborative reading to take place. In several sessions, students read the same text at the same time because it was large enough to be visible to both readers but also because reading it in a linear fashion was not necessary in order for meaning to be generated from it. Furthermore, the process by which the students arrived at an interpretation of its content was collaborative as they pieced together meaning through the dialogues they were able to hold whilst simultaneously viewing the same images. One of the most popular of the texts we read was Shaun Tan's *The Arrival*, a large A4 sized hardback book which uses only drawings to explore the alienation and disjunctures inherent in the immigrant experience. Here is an extract from the pupils' discussion:

ME: So who read *The Arrival*?

FERGUS: I did.

ANDREW: I did.

ME: Did you like it?

FERGUS: Oh, yeah, it was incredibly surreal.

ROBERT: Very, very nice, really lovely...

ANDREW: Artwork.

FERGUS: You can tell it's mirroring America or something because the bit on Ellis Island, I mean you can tell that was Ellis Island.

ME: Have you been to Ellis Island?

FERGUS: No. I've not been outside Europe because I'm poor. I might go somewhere in the summer but not with my family. I'd go with anybody else, that would be fine, but not with my family.

ME: Has anyone else been to Ellis Island?

ROBERT: I've never been out of Britain.

SCOTT: Ellis Island?

ME: Yeah, I mean it looks like Ellis Island.

FERGUS: It's got the big book of immigrants. I've not been there, I'm just awesome [*he says this to the others*].

SCOTT: It's not a big book, it's just loads of walls with thousands of names...

ADAM: Oh my, oh my.

ROBERT: Oh yeah.

FERGUS: What bit is that?

ROBERT: The giant –

FERGUS: Oh yeah.

SCOTT: The chemical warfare people.

ROBERT: Men with hoovers.

SCOTT: Are they hoovers?

FERGUS: I thought that was like – wait, which part is that?

ADAM: It's just after he's been talking to the –

ROBERT: The man and his son.

FERGUS: The bread stuff?

ROBERT: I think it's the bit when he describes to the man how he got there.

FERGUS: I thought it was just general suppression of – can I get more tea?

ADAM: Look at the things in the background!

ANDREW: And just the general atmosphere.

While I start off the discussion it is clear from who speaks that it is the students who assume control of its direction. They have all read the text but Adam is reading it for the first time during the session itself. His sense of wonder at the images is expressed openly in the company of the Group, 'Oh my, oh my'; 'Look at the things in the background!' and it is shared by others who agree and re-engage as he discovers it. The practice or reading of the text is one which is 'Shared...interactive, participatory, and collaborative' (Ivanic et al. 2009: 48). It is through their dialogue that they generate and add layers of meaning. The 'giant', the 'chemical warfare people', the 'men with hoovers', the symbols of 'general suppression' are all ways of viewing and interpreting the same image. The additional references to Ellis Island helped them to place the immigrant experience within a historical and cultural context.

The interviews illustrate that the students felt that the practices arising from the Reading Group were somehow in tune with their *roles and identities*. This study took

place within a school in which the majority of pupils were from middle class, economically comfortable backgrounds. Holidays abroad were commonplace amongst most pupils' families and the comments made by Robert and Fergus in the transcript above signal their awareness of their difference from others in the school. This sense of marginality – economic and social – was a strong current running through the group. There was a disproportionate representation of pupils on scholarships (for both academic excellence and family circumstances) in the Group. Coupled with this was a sometimes painful awareness of the marginal status of the comic reader both within the school and more generally in UK culture. Many of them expressed some embarrassment in front of their peers about attending the Club. 'It sounds a bit like saying you're going to the "People who think Batman is great group" or something. Yeah, it sounds a bit sort of...geeky,' Adam told me. Robert said,

Well (laughing), for instance, when my teacher read out Graphic Novel Reading Group in form time there was a sort of murmured giggle from the background. I can't imagine it's a particularly socially accepted one.

The reputation and stereotypes associated with graphic novel reading are important if we are to consider the possibility of concepts such as 'border crossing' or 'harnessing'. Ivanic et al. (2009: 57) argue that, 'people's sense of identity (that is, their sense of who they are and who they want to become) affects, to a degree, which practices they become involved with and the purposes they aim to meet, the meaning they take from texts and the values which become attached to those texts and practices'. This was confirmed by my discovery that there were many pupils in school who read comics (they asked me about them, borrowed them from me and discussed them after lessons) but refused to attend the Club. Su was an interesting case because despite some peer pressure – her friends had queried her attendance at the Club – she

had chosen to come along anyway. In interview, however, she tended to excuse her interest in comics by ascribing it to her Asian background as comic reading is more widespread in China and Japan. For most of the 'Cool Club' their attendance was something they were privately, if not publicly, at ease with – they already considered themselves as 'uncool'; whereas for Su, a popular and well-known pupil, it appeared more of a struggle (See Sabeti, 2011).

The analysis clearly confirms that the practices around reading graphic novels share most of the characteristics that students in the colleges valued in non-curricular literacy practices. As well as their multimodal, participatory, agentic, generative and self-determined nature, they also share their attunement with the participants' sense of identity and purpose in engaging in a literacy practice. For my participants the Group affirmed their hitherto unacknowledged and undervalued interest in comics. It also provided a forum for socializing and for analyzing the texts through discursive practices. This in turn, lent the texts and the practice they had previously engaged in alone more gravity and value within a school context, albeit an extra-curricular one. The flexibility of the event of the Reading Group with regards to attendance, prescribed reading, participation, terms of discourse, rules of engagement and power relations, proved vital to its value for the pupils. They also had a clear sense of their *audience*, in the sense of who they were reading for, or with. The fact that these were 'friends' or 'like-minded people' as Scott put it and not 'random' – a description he applied to his peers in curriculum English lessons - was highly important to them. It meant that they were relaxed about expressing opinions, sharing knowledge and even showing off their more specialist, 'geeky' interests. The features of the Reading Group I have described above, as well as interview data, all confirm the findings of

the LfLFE project in terms of the aspects of the practice the students valued.

However, I now want to move on to argue that these findings could also be extended and possibilities for pedagogical change explored by looking in detail at a late session of the Reading Group.

A late Reading Group session: *V for Vendetta*

Alan Moore and David Lloyd's graphic novel, *V for Vendetta*, was one of the last texts we read together. It is a dystopian vision of a future London; the main character, V, is a revolutionary and anarchist who wears a Guy Fawkes mask. The novel itself is composed of ten issues of the original comic book published in the 1980s and is presented in a deliberately muted and bleak colour scheme. This session was particularly interesting because it was the first one which Su, a late newcomer to the Group, attended. While she knew all the other students, she was not in the same friendship group and did not share their interest in science fiction; she was, however, unbeknownst to them, an avid reader of comics. Su, like Andrew, was in my Higher English class and was pleased when she found out I liked graphic novels and comics. It is evident from her clear, focused contributions to the conversation that she came to the session with the expectation that the text would be discussed and analyzed in much the same way as she was used to in English lessons. In this sense, she reflected some of my own assumptions at the start of the year and served as a useful contrast with the practices of other, more established members of the group. I remember distinctly feeling at the end of this particular lunch hour that the session itself had been unsuccessful. It was indeed, by normal classroom standards, a chaotic and

seemingly unstructured event, but the intellectual level of the discussion was more rigorous than ever before. The tenor of the Reading Group had changed quite significantly by this stage; I had become more relaxed about practices that were emerging and the pupils had acquired a degree of self-confidence about guiding the discussion themselves.

ANDREW: I liked it a lot.

ROBERT: Yeah, I really, really liked it. It's very *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.

ANDREW: 1982 actually.

ROBERT: Oh, shush.

ME: Did anyone read David Lloyd's comments at the front. I thought they were interesting.

ANDREW: Yeah, so did I.

ROBERT: Well, I looked at it and thought, 'This is a big block of writing' and went on to read the entire comic, meaning to come back to it, but forgot.

ANDREW: That's why you can't read the 'Virus Comix' stuff. Well, actually, nobody can read the 'Virus Comix' stuff...

[*Su enters*]

Not only does the discussion plunge straight into the expression of opinion about the text, but it is initiated by one of the students. The respective knowledge of the text (and other texts) between the pupils becomes a matter of gentle mockery rather than one-upmanship. Andrew's reference to the publication year of *V for Vendetta*, 1982 as a joke corrective to Robert's analogy with Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (also a

dystopian vision of the future) is received in good spirit. Robert is also at ease admitting that he did not read the ‘big block of writing’ at the front where David Lloyd discusses the 1980s in Britain at length as a context for the book’s pessimism. Andrew’s digression about ‘the Virus Comix stuff’ (an on-line comic strip which is notoriously wordy, carrying the tag line ‘Comix with too many words since 2007’) is not a self-conscious one but naturally arises out of an association he makes from Robert’s comment. Rather than framing the discussion of the graphic novel as in earlier sessions, such digressions are peppered throughout the transcript. The discussion itself is non-linear and haphazard in its structure, dotting from one reference to another at the whim of individual pupils.

ME: Did you like the fact that it was set in Britain?

ANDREW: Very much so.

SU: It made everything so much more significant.

JAMIE: It could all be current political...

ANDREW: Ok, so V is Nick Clegg.

JAMIE: Well, yeah he could be.

ANDREW: No one knows who he is and he is two-dimensional and fictional.

SU: Who? Nick Clegg? [She laughs]. You know, there is a Conservative MP speaking at the PPE society today. They’re going to rip him up.

RHYS: I don’t like the Conservatives. They’re going to scrap the EU Bill of Rights and mess everything up.

While a general conversation about politics and voting ensues, the context of the text is still in their minds. They do the job of making the content of *V for Vendetta* relevant to their own lives themselves. Jamie returns to it later,

JAMIE: I liked it when the Scottish guy died. He annoyed me.

ME: I suppose it explores the question of what you have to do to get what you want...murder, terrorism. To what extent do you think he is justified?

RHYS: Well, it's an evil government.

ANDREW: To some extent he accepts that he's not that much of a hero and it's all about a performance.

While in these discussions I participate and perhaps nudge them along at times, the momentum of the conversation is with the students. They are not concerned with whether or not I follow their line of thought and digress frequently. In the extract below, for example, they move effortlessly from a discussion of the character of V to internet search engines and back again.

ANDREW: I like, or rather don't like, the fact that he speaks in quotes. A lot.

RHYS: It's quite a funky way of speaking.

JAMIE: It's okay as long as you recognize the quotes.

ANDREW: No, it's just showing off.

ADAM: It's worse than 'Attitudes'.

ANDREW: 'Attitudes' is fantastic.

JAMIE: No, it's worse than Bing maps.

ANDREW: Bing maps? The best thing about Bing is Bing maps. It doesn't have the fancy API like Google maps but it's really pretty and it's really clever.

JAMIE: Bing? No! It took me about half an hour to stop Bing being my default search engine.

ANDREW: At least three pages of adverts for every search.

ROBERT: Bing's terrible.

ANDREW: The point is, is it pretentious? Hmm..? But V is just putting on a performance and is not necessarily a hero of the people.

JAMIE: But he's obviously making an effort with an absurd culture which the government is controlling. He's got all these books, film posters and music.

ANDREW: In so far as he can do anything, as long as he has a counter-plan.

It is Andrew who brings the conversation back into focus again, with an analysis of Moore's decision to have V speak in quotations to highlight his performative nature. There is a serious point being made about whether or not it is important to recognize the quotations which they do not extend. There is no self-consciousness about their references to technology and 'geeky' knowledge; in fact, they indulge in their competitive repartee happily. Their positioning as 'comic readers' is not at the forefront of their minds as it had been in previous sessions. They express freely the mental associations they make and hence their interests and, by implication, their identities are brought into line with the practices in which they are engaged. To pick up the metaphor of music as outlined by Ivanic et al. they are themselves finding resonance between the content of the text, their practice and their everyday lives

(including their out of school practices and identities). Throughout the discussion they are extremely supportive of each other and collaborate on interpreting the text. The plot is quite elaborate and they express their confusion about certain aspects of it frankly to each other,

JAMIE: The night club scene did hurt my eyes a bit...I mean, what's going on here, for example?

[He holds out the text. All peer at it and several speak out at the same time.]

SU: Yeah, I didn't get that bit either.

ANDREW: I think it's just the –

ADAM: He's mocking the –

ANDREW: It's not him.

ADAM: Can we go to that bit where he imagines what the future will be like?

JAMIE: Her father looked really weird.

SU: Yeah, what happened to her Dad?

JAMIE: He got taken away.

ADAM: He too was at a camp thing.

[They flick back and forth through the text trying to decipher the story].

ANDREW: Reading backwards is more fun.

Not only is their understanding of the text reached through a shared and participatory process, but it is also non-linear. If we look at the quality of the discussion in sections of this Reading Group, what has been learned is substantial and emerges from haphazard conversations interspersed with references to a variety of other sets of knowledge. Following a brief interlude, Rhys asks the others a question.

RHYS: The thing is, though, you know how he's supposed to be a martyr and then she dresses up as him and pretends to be, like he's still alive? Doesn't that sort of defeat the point of the fact that he's died?

JAMIE: The thing is that all he knows is how to destroy and bomb; Evie knows how to build up a new society.

RHYS: It just feels a bit purposeless, that's all.

ADAM: Well, he's crashing it more and more into chaos. That's why his reign is over; it's her turn.

RHYS: You mean, it's 'take what you want' but not 'do as you please'?

JAMIE: Indeed. This is chaos, not anarchy.

Later he asks,

RHYS: The 'V' that he talks about, is that like Winston Churchill's victory sign or is it literally V for Vendetta?

ANDREW: I think it's November the fifth.

SU: Yeah.

ADAM: And also the number of the room which was used.

ANDREW: And Beethoven's Fifth. I like that bit, that's very clever. And V for Victory and V for a bunch of other things.

These are the sorts of student-led discussion that any English teacher would relish taking place in their classroom. Yet, they have emerged from practices which do not normally take place within curricular spaces. Here the discussion of the 'V' emblem sits neatly within what Stanley Fish has called the dominant 'interpretive strategy' of literary criticism – a belief that texts possess certain properties (for example, symbolism) which we demonstrate through analysis. (See Sabeti, 2012) However, they also display a healthy irreverence for some of these strategies. At one point in the conversation they refer again to books studied in English – to 'that old woman' in *To Kill a Mockingbird* and to Blanche Dubois, the main character in *A Streetcar Named Desire*.

JAMIE: Oh I know her name. Mrs Dubose.

ADAM: It's pronounced Dubois (mockingly, mimicking the Southern accent of the characters in *Streetcar*).

JAMIE: No, no, because it doesn't have an 'i' in it.

FERGUS: It's not...?

JAMIE: If you put them together you get white woods.

FERGUS: What? [*To me*] Do you know what they're talking about? Is that a weird euphemism or something?

JAMIE: No, but watch out that stuff fizzes up.

FERGUS: Is this from *Streetcar*?

ANDREW: It's from *Streetcar* and stuff.

JAMIE: The coke fizzles over and Blanche gives a shriek which is of both orgasmic ecstasy and of fear.

FERGUS: Oh dear, that's quite crude.

ADAM: Well, it's symbolic to the plot.

JAMIE: [*Sarcastically*] Yes, it's symbolic. Everything's symbolic in that play.

ADAM: "They told me to get a streetcar..." – what was it?

JAMIE: [*In a Southern accent*] "They told me to get a streetcar named desire, then ride six blocks to Cemeteries and get off at Elysian Fields."

[*The others all laugh*]

ME: You do sound remarkably like Blanche would.

JAMIE: Well, I was Blanche most of the time we were reading it.

FERGUS: I didn't get to play anyone when we were reading *Macbeth*.

The mockery and mimicking of what takes place in the English classroom is discernible here, from the notion that everything is symbolic to the echo of the teacher's voice in the phrase, 'If you put them together, you get white woods' as she explains the hidden meaning of Blanche Dubois's name. The irreverence for classroom practices, at the same time as they are able to demonstrate those practices in their analysis of the text, signals students who feel less constrained, more able to express themselves. Furthermore, what emerges from this late session is an engaged, sophisticated reading of a complex and challenging text.

When asked retrospectively about their reason for attending the Group almost all of the students stated the desire to find out more about graphic novels or to read them in more depth. Robert told me,

I suppose it makes you read a bit more into things. I mean sometimes when you're reading, you don't think very much about what you're reading. I mean, you take it in, but not the extent that we're properly discussing it. It's made me want to read more graphic novels, I suppose.

For Fergus, the Group was an opportunity to be 'fed' recommended reads; for Scott it had changed the way he read from a more superficial enjoyment to what he described as, 'a lot more critically now', an appreciation of the way graphic novels worked. So the *purposes* for their engagement with this practice were complex. They enjoyed the social factor, the technology/mode being discussed, the way it re-positioned the text and themselves within the wider culture of the school, but also the way in which their analysis and appreciation was deepened in ways that they struggled with in English classrooms. Scott said,

In class, I don't necessarily put my hand up for things and just think about things in my head and later that's what's been said...I enjoy the Group because I'm able to say what I'm saying right here to everyone else and see what they think and also have it added to...it makes it feel more real, like I've actually said it and thought it.

For Scott it was not so much his ability to understand or appreciate the text but his ability to communicate and share that appreciation which was altered within the context of the Reading Group.

Possibilities for Pedagogy?

The practices which eventually comprised this Reading Group suggest the potential of what I term *distraction* as a pedagogic mode. Not only were graphic novels, because of their layout and visual mode (as the pupils identified), ones which could be read in states of distraction, but the affordances of the extra-curricular space allowed a laxity of concentration or focus which became pedagogically productive. While a normal classroom discussion of a text would not allow for the seemingly irrelevant digressions that took place in this session, I am arguing that it was precisely these which generated the interpretation and appreciation of the graphic novel. Indeed, the ways in which pupils appeared to be ‘distracted’ from the task (what would normally be termed ‘off task’ behaviour) proved to be the very props which enabled them to understand, share, and feel involved in the reading of the text. In this respect my findings would appear to confirm the arguments Gemma Moss makes about the differences in structure between informal and pedagogic discourse (2000, 2001). Using Bernstein’s concepts of horizontal and vertical discourse, and focusing on Media Studies as a school subject, Moss believes that the transfer of media texts from one domain (the informal) to the other (the pedagogic setting) means that they ‘become subject to a very different discourse and are effectively transformed as objects of knowledge.’ (2000: 57). In the case of my data, the haphazard discussion I have described could be seen as ‘horizontal’ – there was no hierarchy of knowledge on display (Orwell was just as valuable as the Bing search engine). While curriculum or ‘school’ knowledge could be incorporated into this horizontal discourse, Moss suggests that it would not work the other way round without undergoing a change in

its nature and value. It would become ‘verticalized’, in other words, and subject to the same hierarchies as other school knowledge.

Unlike the distinct domains of home and college, identified by the LfLFE project, or the ‘informal’ and ‘formal’ signaled by Moss, the Reading Group was itself a boundary space between the curriculum and non-curriculum - it was *extra*-curricular. It was positioned within the school but out of designated class time. The teacher was present, but not necessarily in the role of an expert, and the students were self-selected and not grouped by a member of staff. There were some elements of both sides of the ‘border’ and literacy practices from different domains (home, the English classroom etc.) mixed with each other to form the beginnings of something distinct, shedding light on the possibilities of both text and context for curricular learning. Importantly, this ‘bordering work’ was carried out by the students themselves as they negotiated the space of the Group. As Mannion et al. put it, ‘communicative practices involve re-contextualisation and enactment in emergent contexts through drawing on traces of previously experienced contexts’ (2009: 336).

As the Reading Group sessions progressed these ‘previously experienced contexts’ were extended to include not only the English classroom but practices usually hidden from teachers – out of school engagements with technology, friendship banter etc. In this sense, what the Reading Group did was provide an insight into the previously invisible literacy practices in which these students engaged. One could argue, then that aspects of these practices could be ‘harnessed’ by the teacher for curricular pedagogy. It was clear that there was much that ‘resonated’ or ‘struck a chord’ (Mannion et al. 2009) for these students between the Reading Group and their

everyday lives. This manifested itself in terms of what they said they valued about the Group – the interactions with others, the ability to express themselves freely, the additional knowledge about graphic novels. But it also emerged over time as they began to understand that such things – not valued or permitted in curricular spaces such as English lessons - *were* valued within the context of the Reading Group. Their competence as readers of graphic novels was dependent on the setting in which they were read, and the ways in which their ‘comics literacy’ was enacted depended on the other pupils present, the chance combination of information available, the associations made through conversation. As Moss points out, this is all different from the production of school knowledge which depends more on the organized pursuit of a standard (2001:149). As a participant observer in this Group I gained knowledge of these pupils’ out of school literacy practices: the *content* which interested them, the *actions and processes* they enjoyed participating in and their *identities and values*. I began to understand what could be achieved if my own role was more flexible, less controlling and authoritative.

Conclusion:

The LfLFE framework provided an extremely useful and detailed way of exploring the characteristics of this emergent literacy practice. The findings of my project confirm, and to some extent, extend that framework. However, we could also argue that the Graphic Novel Reading Group challenges some of these ideas in some significant ways. These are to do with notions of agency and power, space and positioning and cultures of reading around certain texts. Part of the value in the

Reading Group, for the students, lay in the alteration of power relations between me, the teacher and them. The text (the comics medium) and the context (the extra-curricular space) are vital to this shift. While I was able to provide information about 'quality' graphic novels and to suggest reading, I was not the only member of the Group with this capacity. For many of the participants this was a second or third reading of a particular text; for me it was always the first. Many of them had a better understanding of the plots, content and medium than I did; they certainly had more experience of reading it. In this sense, who the 'learner' was in the situation was unclear and shifting. There were times when it was clear that I was learning things from them but also times when what they knew was expressed but not shared with me – I was excluded from conversations altogether. These shifts in power relations are not always possible within mainstream classroom contexts where the teacher is clearly in the position of power. Even in learner centred teaching strategies, such as co-operative learning, structures of support are established and constructed in advance by teachers. The text itself destabilized my role as expert - this was not conventional literature and my degree or specialism was not in the medium of graphic novels. This inevitably altered the way in which pupils viewed me.

Secondly, and just as importantly, the fact that this was taking place as an extra-curricular activity which was voluntary also shifted this power away from me. The flexibility and freedom this afforded the pupils meant that I was never in control of attendance, timing or activity. The small numbers associated with an extra-curricular activity also played a part in determining the flexibility of proceedings - there were only a maximum of ten of them at any one time. The productiveness and potentials of the non-linear and haphazard discussion would be challenged by greater numbers of

participants as one would normally encounter in a classroom context. Furthermore, the fact that it was graphic novels we were reading seemed to lend the extra-curricular positioning particular relevance. The students regarded the reading of comics as a marginalized activity within the school context, in the same way that most of them tended to see themselves as ‘different’ or marginal to mainstream (academic and sporty) school culture. To place the graphic novel anywhere other than a created third space between the curricular and non-curricular would have resulted in it losing some of its value. As Andrew put it, ‘there’s an attraction in it being cultish’. While they lamented their ‘geekiness’ and tendency towards isolated self-referential jokes and knowledge, they also enjoyed it. The culture around the reading of certain texts, in other words, has implications for the practices which arise from it. It was precisely this positioning – both in and out of ‘school’ – which produced some of the most productive aspects of the practice that evolved. Practice co-emerges with context, and this then posits various problems when it comes to moving or ‘harnessing’ various aspects of a practice across contexts because the context inevitably changes the practice. Finally, in thinking about both the text and context, we must take into consideration the fact that the *purpose* of reading in this case was essentially pleasure, whatever else the students may or may not have gained from it. These were students following academic courses in an independent school; this was free time for them. The fact that the purpose of this lunch hour was not academic was also part of its value.

In highlighting some of these practical issues I do not mean to contradict the argument that there are potentials for pedagogy if ‘aspects’ of literacy practices valued by students outside of institutional learning contexts are taken seriously and

employed by those whose job it is to teach them. The trend in education in the last few decades has been to prioritize individual achievement and the acquirement of subject specific skills. To go back to Bernstein's terminology, as employed by Moss, school literacy is inherently 'vertical'. However, in recent years, and particularly within the Scottish context relevant to the data in this paper, the move towards a more process centred curriculum suggests a change in these priorities. The philosophy underpinning Scotland's new Curriculum for Excellence appears to place value in the kinds of 'horizontal' discourse (networking, topic work, group work etc.) that form part of more informal literacy practices and which emerged in the case of the Graphic Novel Reading Group detailed in this paper. They are valued both as a *way of learning* and a skill to *be* learned. One way in which this is figured is the very broad definition the CforE has of texts (it includes comics and graphic novels) and of literacy generally. What I have been arguing here is that this openness to what has previously been 'out of school' needs to be handled carefully. In the case of comic texts, like so many other popular media appropriated and deployed in educational contexts today, a simple transfer from one context to another is a crude and often ineffective pedagogical strategy. The associations people have with texts, the physical properties of the texts themselves, their usual contexts of use and their reputations within particular communities (inside and outside of educational institutions) all play a complex part in the practices which develop around their use. What would happen if these graphic novels were read in the classroom? What would happen if novels were read in the extra-curricular space? The answer to such questions might provide a more nuanced exploration of the relationship between text, context and practice and the advantages and disadvantages of 'harnessing' everyday literacy practice for pedagogic uses.

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